

Limestone, Bruised by veausy

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Mike pauses, hands stilling over the kitchen counter. “Uh,” he says absently, sifting through the drawer above the stove for a good knife, “I can’t remember.”

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Author's Note:

Please note that I chose not to use archive warnings.
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“Where’d you get those bruises?”

Mike pauses, hands stilling over the kitchen counter. There are four slices of whole wheat bread spread out in front of him, and he’s been trying fruitlessly to decide which kind of sandwich would be good for this week’s picnic. Last week was grilled cheese, but it’s getting cooler as early fall drifts into winter, and by the time he’s able to unpack all the food on the grass, the cheese gets too congealed to enjoy.

He eyes the jar of peanut butter by the microwave. Holly must have taken it from the shelf and left it there while heating up her hot cocoa earlier. He wonders if there’s any strawberry jam left, of the brand El always loved.

He turns to the fridge, fingers wrapping around the handle, when Lucas calls, sharply, “Mike.”

He opens the fridge door, clinking around as he moves dishes aside and hears the heavy sigh behind him. There’s an apricot jelly jar, half empty, and an unopened one of grape. He pulls the latter out and drops it to the countertop with a clatter.

“Uh,” he says absently, sifting through the drawer above the stove for a good knife, “I can’t remember.”

Lucas shuffles a little, but Mike doesn’t look up, isn’t sure what he’s doing. There’s a small silver butter knife with a wide spine that’s glinting up at him in the dim lights of the kitchen, and he grabs it. El had been the one to teach him to smear peanut butter first, because it clogs up the bread and the jelly doesn’t make a mess everywhere, so he does that; the Extra Crunchy Jif makes soft noises under the metal as he spreads it, and otherwise that’s the only sound in the kitchen

for a while.

“Didn’t think you’d go for a PB&J today.”

Mike snorts. “Never thought of it before, somehow. She loves sugar.”

Lucas is quiet, just watching him work. Upstairs, the shower starts up, and the clang of chugging water in the plumbing is audible throughout the house. Holly must be home from soccer practice.

“How long have you been doing this, now?”

Mike screws the lid back on the jar and sticks it in its spot on the top shelf, joints cracking from the stretch. He hasn’t been very physically active lately, not for the last several months, and it’s starting to show in the lack of stamina and breathlessness he keeps experiencing. Soon other people will start to notice and it’ll be a nightmare. He makes an absent note to start, like, walking around the block or something. It’ll be good, El would love it.

“Hmm?”

“The picnics,” Lucas says carefully. His face is blank and the slight curve of his mouth is polite. He’s so serious now, wide shoulders hunched as he leans on the counter and watches Mike. “How long have you been doing those?”

“Oh,” Mike murmurs. He looks for a napkin to wipe the peanut butter off the knife, and then starts to twist the top of the jam container. His weak muscles protest a little, but he persists, finally dropping the lid with a metallic clang. The jam is thick, its rich smell spreading through the air quickly and making Lucas take an audible sniff, nose upturned. He begins spreading the fruit preserve over the peanut butter carefully, sure not to touch the bare bits of bread that could get soggy. “A few months?”

Lucas hums. “Since March?”

Mike makes a noncommittal noise and keeps working. Once he’s finished, he drops the knife into the sink and connects the bread into two full sandwiches, carefully wrapping them in the saran wrap from the drawer at his waist.

“What else are you taking?”

Mike takes a deep breath. He loves Lucas, his oldest friend, the one who has always understood the darker and meaner side of Mike and urged him not to drown in it, the one who has still stuck by him in this last stretch of time when he’s become completely antagonistic and antisocial; but Mike really wishes right now that he’d get the hell out of his house.

“It’s her birthday this weekend, but I won’t be able to go then because Mom’s family is visiting for Thanksgiving. So I figured some chocolate, some Eggos.” He smiles at the last word, and goes to retrieve the box out of the freezer.

“Won’t they get cold and mushy?” Lucas seems to understand the futility of the question himself, head snapping back a little and eyes averted. He’s still frozen in his original pose with his arms crossed in front of him on the counter, leaning heavily on his elbows and boring holes into Mike’s work station. “Are you taking them out of the box?”

Mike shrugs. This is exactly why he hadn’t wanted to let Lucas through the front door earlier, because of *this*; this awkwardness and this pity he can feel building in the other’s eyes, this weird silence he cannot fill because any possible answer from him would seem bizarre.

He lifts the box of waffles into the paper bag he’s got waiting to the side, dropping them to the bottom and setting the sandwiches atop it.

His fingers drum lightly on the surface of the counter as he thinks, wonders what else to take. El would probably want something warm to drink, maybe some fruit. He wonders if he can make a fruit salad out of the single apple and bag of grapes he saw in the fridge earlier, considers how sad of a salad it would be.

Lucas rouses him from his thoughts. “You should mix some maple syrup with chocolate syrup. Erica does it, says the taste is more intense.”

Mike makes a face. "I'm picturing it and dry heaving. Isn't that too viscous?"

Lucas drops his head forward and chuckles. "Okay, SAT genius. Too viscous, maybe, but super sweet and still just syrup. El's feelings for chocolate never d –" he cuts himself off and turns tight eyes on Mike.

Mike ignores him, hands finally getting back to work closing the jar of jam and wiping the counter of its stickiness. There's a little plastic Tupperware container in the dish drying rack that he grabs and sets in front of himself, reaching for the grapes and ripping them unceremoniously from their stalk. Once the container is full, he rinses them with cold water and drains it, placing another item of food in the bag.

As he lifts his head to say something, Holly thunders down the stairs and stomps into the kitchen, wet hair leaving drops of water in her wake. She squeals happily and wraps her arms around Lucas's waist, who straightens from his slouch to meet her.

"Hey, kiddo, how was practice?" he asks through a grin.

"Stupid. Coach benched me because Lindsay pulled my hair and I punched her in the neck. Like, everyone saw it. But he didn't bench her." She pouts a little, picking a grape off the mostly-barren stalk still lying in a bag and chewing it thoughtfully. The light coming through the window is starting to dim, and Mike knows he only has a limited time to get everything ready and bike out before the sun goes down. He wipes wet hands on his shirt and reaches for the syrups, looking for something to pour them into. Holly watches this for a moment before asking, "Are you going with Mike to hang out with El?"

Lucas sighs. "Nah. Max finally passed her driving test last week, so she wants to do a trip to the park outside of town, but she's too scared to be in the car alone."

Holly snickers. "Bet she's happy to finally have a license and a car. She's been whining about it for two years."

Lucas nods and mutters, "Still can't believe the guy gave her his car."

"What guy?" Holly mumbles through a large mouthful of grapes.

Mike shifts the bag of fruit over toward her so she can continue snacking and sets a little round cup in front of himself, pouring the chocolate and maple syrups in simultaneously and watching them coalesce with disgust. The other two are watching as well, faces amused.

"Her brother. He got a job out in Ohio fixing up cars, so he bought himself a new one and gave his old one over. It's a piece of fetid crap, but we got it checked out and it seems to work fine."

Mike snaps a lid onto the round Tupperware and says, snidely, "Okay, SAT genius." He's being nasty, he knows, and he knows how it seems - that he's envious, that he's bitter - and maybe he is. He doesn't know himself anymore.

Lucas rolls his eyes.

Holly turns sad eyes to her brother and watches as he stands with his arms on his hips and stares around the kitchen, looking lost. He ignores her.

"Why don't you take some flowers?"

Mike knows she doesn't understand, but he winces with exaggeration. "No, that's - no."

"She loved the purple calla lilies I gave her for the Snow Ball in January, and she always loved pink -"

"No," Mike roars, and he doesn't look at her. In his periphery, he sees Lucas set a gentle hand on Holly's head to comfort her, and she curls into his side, making herself small.

Mike sighs, brushing angry fingers through his hair and hunching forward slightly. There's a box of expensive candy on his bedside table that he remembers suddenly, and he sprints out of the room, slamming through the doorway of his bedroom to grab it. There's a pretty decorative ribbon wrapped around the box and tied into a

bow, and he fingers it carefully, throat closing in on itself.

When he comes back to the kitchen, Holly is gone and Lucas is rifling around in the fridge. When he turns around, he's holding a bag of baby carrots, an inquisitive look on his face. "Some healthy snacks? El's a health nut."

Mike grins. "Besides the four boxes of Eggos she devours daily?"

"Right," Lucas grins back.

Mike takes the carrots from his friend and drops them into the paper bag, which is beginning to bulge a little with all it's containing. He pats the handles with finality and stretches, his ears filling with static at the rush of released endorphins. Almost the way he felt anytime El hugged him.

"What sandwiches next week?" Lucas asks curiously.

"Haven't thought about it. Figure it out at today's picnic."

Lucas nods. "Does she help you decide?"

Mike shrugs, cheeks warming. Why can't Lucas just *leave*?

His friend stands there for a minute, arms crossed over his chest and appraising Mike unabashedly, before finally he takes a step back. "Well, I gotta get home before Max calls. Listen, be careful, okay?" When Mike doesn't respond, Lucas leans to the side to meet his gaze and stares at him imploringly. "I'm serious. It's icy on the roads, and it gets dark really fast. You'll be lugging that giant bag and probably distracted as always. Take a blanket or a towel or something thick, the grass will be really wet –"

"I'm fine," Mike says, digging the heels of his hands into his eyes. "I've done this every week for months, Lucas."

He hears his friend sigh, and then the soft pad of feet out of the room signals his exit. After a minute, Lucas calls through the hallways from the front door, "See you in third period tomorrow."

Mike grunts his response, waits for the telltale sound of a car engine

to fade away, and goes to grab his coat.

It's gray and humid outside, but the sun keeps trying bravely to break through the clouds, which gives him hope. He probably has about an hour or two before dark. Without wasting time, he shouts something up the stairs without really hearing it and runs to the garage with the bag rattling at his side.

Two helmets hang from the handles of his bike, and he secures one onto his head, leaving the other to swing freely as he walks out into the driveway. Its soft yellow sheen greets him on every upswing and he brushes his little finger over the strap as he settles onto the seat.

He pictures El's face as his legs move over the pedals.

He pictures her grin as she unwraps her sandwich and bites into it, the even bigger sparkle in her eyes when she unearths the box of waffles. His own face morphs into a foreign smile at the thought, his cheeks uncomfortable with the now-unfamiliar stretch.

The wind is billowing through his hair and creating a constant noise in his ears, and he can almost hear her breathing and feel the wrap of her arms around his waist and the dig of her chin into his shoulder, her giggling.

The last time she sat on the back of his bike was months ago. He counts; Lucas was right, it was in March. Their first picnic, March eighth, sharing a picnic blanket on the grass outside Hop's cabin and then biking down to the arcade to meet with the others as spring finally made itself known. It had been one of the most intimate experiences they'd ever had; El had told him that she wanted them to live together when they moved out to Illinois for college and that she thought about him when she looked at married couples in the street. She'd been so open, always, so easy to delve inside. She had never kept secrets, not of fact nor feeling. The air then had been softer, more kind, the sounds of nature had been different. He thinks he remembers birds chirping back then, but now it's utterly silent in the streets and behind him. His back is cold.

He stops at the iron gate and leans his old, trusty bicycle against the cut fieldstone wall beside it. The bag rustles in his hand as he hefts

the handles up into the crook of the opposite elbow, and he begins the trek into the fenced grounds.

The cemetery is quiet, gloomy around him. Grass shines freshly up at him, sparkling from the morning shower that had eased into a sprinkle for the rest of the day. He uses two mausoleums and a columbarium as his now-ingrained navigation, turning at a few peaks and valleys until he reaches El.

He can see her, despite the certain knowledge that he can't, sitting balanced daintily on her gravestone and grinning at him. Her hair is being swept gently by a breeze that whistles through the surrounding trees, and she's wearing the pink dress he gave her the first night they met. It's clean and good as new, still brightly colored and loose on her, and over it she's wearing the jean jacket she'd worn on March eighth.

He doesn't know where that jacket is anymore. She'd taken it off at the arcade, probably dropped it haphazardly over a chair when she went to try to beat Max at some game in the back. It could have gotten lost or stored by the authorities afterward. Maybe it went up in flames along with everything else. He wishes he still had it.

He walks slowly, steps sure but agonized, until he reaches the limestone of her grave. There's fresh weeds growing near the sides, and he yanks them out, frown furrowing his brow. Setting the bag on the ledge beneath the inscription of her name, he unties the blanket from around his neck and sets it down right in front of the epitaph, curling up on it with crossed legs. His muscles protest again, and he decides he really needs to start moving more. He's barely been leaving his bed outside of school hours.

El's still sitting at the top, smiling at him, serene. One of her long legs swings slightly, and other is crossed over it, the soft material of her dress caressing her smooth thighs.

He nearly reaches up but thinks better of it. He doesn't want to shatter the illusion. He wraps shaking knuckles around his knees until they turn white. The cold, wet ground beneath him is hard, unyielding. The silence is deafening.

"I brought peanut butter and jelly," he croaks through a cracking voice, but he can't do any better right now, so he doesn't repeat himself. El heard him, anyway, her sweet smile unwavering. "Figured you've had enough of the savory stuff for a while."

It was grilled cheese last week, BLT the week before, and he struggles to think further back than that. Turkey pesto, maybe? Tomato and cheese? El's liked anything he's ever brought her, he remembers that much. She was always eyeing him as if he'd performed some sort of magic just by smushing some ingredients together for her.

He reaches into the bag and ignores the inscription staring at him from above his hands. It's not the time yet. It'll never be the time.

"Lucas made me bring carrots, too, since you're a weirdo and liked veggies so much." The word scratches at his heart as soon as it leaves him. It sounds wrong. "Like. You like them so much."

El's smile melts a little, drifting into that serious looks she often had, a constant part of her from the moment she was taken from her mother. He loves that hardness, that depth, that little space inside her mind that nobody could ever quite see or touch. He figures she incepted that same little space within him, the same nook of pitch black that Lucas has come to recognize and give space to.

"I wish you'd got to try Mom's new carrot cake. She's started baking ever since this new boyfriend, and our kitchen smells like sugar all the time."

I'm happy Karen found someone who makes her want to bake, he hears El say.

"His name's Chuck. He makes us call him *Chucky*. It's weird," he mutters, unwrapping one sandwich and setting the other on the limestone ledge, still snug in its saran. "At least I'll be out of here next fall, and Holly actually loves the guy."

El studies him with somber eyes, lips pursed.

"I'm happy for them, I promise. All of them." Everyone, ever. Everyone but him and El.

She blinks.

Her swinging feet are bare, neatly manicured long toes hovering over the blanket but casting no shadow. She'd lost her shoes when the Hawkins National Laboratory rogues had burst into the arcade with guns pointed.

He remembers it in flashes, the jarring sight of men in pristine lab coats after nearly four years of thinking that they were finally safe, that El was really out. The glimmer of machine guns pointed at kids, some of whom were too young to even get distracted by the sight, still trying to score high on the machines scattered around the arcade.

Mike's eyes had barely processed the thirty men before flying to El in the back corner, who had instantly crouched to the ground and stared intensely at the intruders. She'd placed herself in front of the small cluster of their friends, protective and fierce and amazing as she'd always been and will always be.

Mike blinks the memories away, chewing his sandwich carefully.

"I did the peanut butter trick like you taught me," he garbles. Some of it sticks to the roof of his mouth and he works at it with his tongue, eyes zoned out and aimed at some spot in the distance. The rush of cars and the noise of life outside the graveyard has calmed as the day wears on into night, and it's become peaceable, serene. "Left the crust on, though, so you can rip it off yourself. I know you always get some perverse pleasure from doing that."

He doesn't look up, but he knows El's grinning at him.

He chews in silence for some time, until his sandwich is all gone. He reaches for the carrots then, leaving the thermos of hot chocolate for last. He crunches through two before the urge to speak arises again, like he needs her to know what's inside his head despite it already being the only place she resides anymore. "I applied to that place we talked about in Illinois. Sent the application out yesterday."

El's eyebrows tilt inquisitively, small smile on her lips.

“You loved the campus so much, and we were going to apply there early, so. I did.”

Will you go if you get accepted?

Mike doesn't know. “I want to ... I want to live the life that you'd want for me.” He drops the bag of carrots and buries his face in his hands again. There's tremors starting in his arms, and he doesn't know how long they'll be controllable. “You've always wanted good things for me.”

El doesn't answer him, and maybe that's all right. He never wants to forget the sound of her voice, the deeper one she'd grown into through puberty, a little low but always clear and tinkling when she laughed. Laughs. He doesn't know anymore. He can conjure the sound of her laughter so easily into his mind, it's almost as if it's real.

She laughed so much, that last year leading up to March. Growing into some sort of idea of herself and what she wanted for her future, confident enough that she turned heads in the school hallways, too many admirers for her to know what to do with, but her eyes always seeking him out of the crowds like a homing beacon.

Given enough time, he'll forget the touch of her lips on his, the sounds she made when he sucked hickeys into her neck, the soft hazy look her eyes got when he said, “I love you,” for the first time. He hopes he'll never forget her laughter.

He's spent sleepless nights and half-conscious days retracing his steps, trying to figure out how he could have prevented what happened in March. If he'd jumped in front of her and the rogues hadn't seen her, would she have escaped? If he'd begged more aggressively, more desperately for her not to sacrifice herself, would she have given in? The tears in her wild eyes, the fear, the determination, were any of them subject to the love she still felt for him when she said goodbye for the last time?

He remembers sobbing, loudly, as he fought to drag her bodily from the arcade while the rogues had guns pointed at both of them and all of their friends. Why did she get make that choice? Why was it her

who had to? A choice between dying with El and living with her dead was no choice at all. She hadn't thought so.

On the really bad nights, nights he spends with his arms around the toilet bowl, groaning with phantom physical pain while the rest of the house listens to him with pity, he can see the fire on the backs of his eyelids. The heat of it, the strangled shouts of the rogues as they were engulfed in flames, and El along with them, nose bleeding profusely. He'd seen the blood himself, right before she'd swung her head away, slammed all the rogues down into the ground with a single nod, and thrown her hands up to ignite the entire block.

He'd been held back from running into the burning building by five strangers and one sobbing Hopper, Max weeping on the ground, all the little kids staring with frozen awe at the blinding blaze when firetrucks had finally arrived.

He lifts the carrots again and tosses them back in the paper bag. The thermos is warm to the touch and he feels frozen, so he chugs from it despite the way the cocoa burns his mouth.

You should stop remembering. It's time to forget.

"Shut up, El. You know I won't."

Her laughter tinkles in his ears and washes softly over him, warming him despite the bite in the air as the sun sets.

Mike feels something build in him, amplified by her laughter, a tension thrumming through his body, and he barely realizes when his fists start beating on the gravestone. "El," he sobs, forehead resting against the limestone, hardly noticing the cold of it. "Fuck, El." His tears make a noise when they fall to paper bag and wet it, his legs are protesting from how he's contorted to hug the tombstone, but he can't feel anything at all.

Mike. Please, Mike.

It takes too long for him to rein it in. He blinks, wipes his eyes with the back of one hand, looks up to find El gone.

The sky is pink and blue, dimming incrementally. A breeze starts

again, gently ruffling his hair. It brushes against his cheeks like one of El's soft hands, and he can almost imagine her caress.

"Happy birthday," he manages through a stuffy nose and a voice that's cracked and painful after all his screaming. He reaches into the bag and pulls out the Eggos, the candy box, and sets them gently on the corner of the ledge. He putters a little, trying to arrange them so they look nice, and carefully tops them off with the mixed syrup in its little jar. The colors are all messy and don't make sense, but El would have loved it, he knows.

Someone must have come by earlier and left flowers, which are leaning in a neat bouquet against the carved rock, mocking him. Purple calla lilies. Hopper, then.

He begins to clean up slowly and notices the throb in his hands, fresh bruises for Lucas to ask about. One knuckle is torn open and bleeding, must have snagged on a sharp edge, but he can't even feel it.

He stands on weak legs, tilting a little before he catches himself against the stone, hand right where El had been, and he can fool himself into feeling the remnants of her warmth.

He takes feeble steps backward, eyes glued to the epigraph.

Daughter. Friend. Survivor. Hero.

None of it means anything. It means nothing at all. How has she survived if she's not here? Whose daughter is she if her mother has no child? Is she a hero? No, she's dead.

Another breeze starts, raising bumps along his skin as he keeps taking slow steps back and trying not to tumble. Like a finger over his cheek, or a palm flat on his collarbone. He calms, slowly. He knows it's cold, but he feels warm.

I love you, Mike.

Author's Note:

(I'm sorry.)